

# **Blaze of Glory**

By Tony Russo

"Every mercenary wants to be remembered," Lex "Mad Vornskr" Kempo paused a moment as the jungle browns and greens of Gabredor III rose up toward their diving freighter. With a sardonic smirk, the spacer twisted around in the pilot's seat and gazed at Brixie. "A mercenary doesn't retire gracefully. There's no such thing as an Old Merc's Home either. What a real mercenary wants is to go out... in a blaze of glory."

"Really?" Brixie Ergo shifted around nervously in one of the acceleration chairs situated behind the co-pilot's station. Space was tight in the modified Corellian light freighter, especially up front. The craft rattled and shook as the vessel plunged deeper into the planet's atmosphere. Kempo smiled a toothy, wicked grin.

"Absolutely."

What sounded like a cross between an order and snarl came from the fur-covered being currently occupying the co-pilot's seat beside Kempo.

"Leave the rook alone." Sully Tigereye was a Trunsk, a stout alien species well known for their fighting ability and equally legendary short temper. Bristly brown hairs covered the length of Tigereye's body except for his face and the palms of his hands. As if emphasizing his displeasure with Kempo, two shiny, sharpened tusks protruded from his lower lip. Brixie recalled stories her parents had told her as a child, about Trunks being the showpieces of many a carnival show as gladiators and ring fighters.

If Sully Tigereye had ever been part of such a show in the past, he never let on. What she did know was that he had once been a highly-decorated member of an elite New Republic infiltrator unit. No longer with the New Republic military, he continued to serve with his former colonel in a band of mercenaries called the Red Moons. It was Tigereye who had been appointed as team leader for this mission, and it was Tigereye who had chosen Brixie to come along as combat medic, although it was for a mission that Brixie still did not quite understand. Just sitting close by Lex Kempo and Sully Tigereye made the former medical student uncomfortable, as if she was part of a group she did not truly belong to.

The mercenaries' target was a Karazak Slavers Guild operation lurking in the jungle swamps and dense foliage on Gabredor III. Like the few Red Moon operation files she had a chance to study during her training period, any further information on the exact target and their reason for assaulting it would not be explained in detail until they landed. That protected not only the Red Moons, but those who hired them. All of this secrecy just didn't make any sense to Brixie. What could they hope to accomplish against an entire camp of slavers? Who thought up this brilliant strategy, anyway? Then again, she chided herself -- joining a mercenary force like the Red Moons so she could find her parents was not exactly a brilliant strategy either.

Tigereye continued to berate Lex Kempo. "I didn't ask her to be part of this team to keep you entertained. Just fly this junk pile, if you don't mind."

Unlike Sully Tigereye, who looked naturally forceful yet showed a surprising concern for others, "Mad Vornskr" Kempo easily looked like he had just fallen out of a grim entertainment holo. He claimed to have served with over a dozen different private armies and militias, even a brief stint in the Imperial Army as a scout, as evident from the customized suit of scout trooper armor he wore. The normally eggshell-white armor pieces had been carefully dulled and therma-painted with a camouflage scheme that matched Gabredor's jungle environment. Extra holsters and pockets hid a variety of throwing blades, hold-out blasters, power packs, grenades, medpacs, glow rods and other necessities. With his closely-cropped hair, thin blaster scar on his right cheek and gray eyes, Kempo acted a lot like the intimidating walking arsenal he appeared to be. Still, Tigereye had touched a nerve. Kempo turned defensive as the ship shook again.

"I'm just trying to let our combat medic in on the mysteries of the merc psyche, oh fearless leader."

Brixie sensed almost immediately that Tigereye simply hated that expression. The Trunsk settled for turning his baleful face on Kempo. Trunks were not known for their cordiality, especially under stressful conditions.

"Can we have a little less talking please?" The fourth member of their group spoke up in a whiny voice. Of all who called themselves members of the Red Moons, Hugo Cutter was the last person Brixie would probably think of as a mercenary. An escapee from a psychotrauma ward maybe, but never a soldier. Cutter's hair was as wild and unpredictable as the stares that came from his eyes. Before the start of the mission, Lex Kempo had remarked to her that Hugo Cutter had once been enrolled in the prestigious Imperial Engineers Academy, only to be disbarred after he found it more interesting to blow things apart than put them together. Then again, Kempo always did have a knack for exaggeration. Especially when he talked about himself.

The ship dipped again. Cutter, sitting beside her, inhaled sharply. She reached out a hand to calm him. Cutter reacted by clutching the satchel bag in his lap even tighter.

"Don't touch me!"

"I'm sorry," she faltered out an apology. "I just thought ..."

"Thought what?" He began to laugh hysterically. "That I would need help from the likes of you?"

"Don't knock it," Kempo murmured quietly with a twisted smile.

"Quiet. All of you." Tigereye warned as he checked the pocket navigator he carried in a special pouch as part of his weapons harness. Huge yellow eyes glanced up and caught the reflection of the human with the unkempt hair in the forward cockpit screen. They locked on Cutter like targeters. "Especially you. Stop fidgeting. We're almost down." Cutter's nervousness was wearing even his own patience thin. Their craft shook again. He closed his eyes tightly.

"You know how much I hate insertions!"

"Relax. You clutch those shaped charges any harder and you're likely to set them off."

"Doubtful." The freighter dipped sharply in the thickening atmosphere of Gabredor III. Cutter gulped. "It takes a detonator firing at triple frequency intervals to properly set off a Mesonics focalized explosive."

"I'll make a note," the fur-covered Trunsk growled as he glanced over at Kempo. "How much longer 'till we reach the landing point?"

Kempo checked the navigational readings as they flashed by almost too quickly for Brixie to keep up. "A few more minutes. Sensor masking is holding up so far. A Z-95 patrol upstairs didn't even bother to sniff our contrail."

"I'll feel better when we're down. Brixie, get your gear ready to go."

"Right," she tried to keep her voice steady as she unfastened her restraint harness. The freighter suddenly lost power and began a steep dive. Brixie was immediately thrown into a wailing Cutter, who was positively revolted by her close proximity. Kempo wrestled the controls back. Regaining her footing, Brixie tried to ignore Cutter's expression and his tightly-closed eyes.

"What was that?" Tigereye asked.

Kempo shook his head. All business now, he was fighting to bring the ship back under control. Red lights broke out all over the engineering panels. Alarms hooted noisily. The freighter abruptly rolled right and pitched down hard. Tigereye began flipping switches -- the ship's starboard maneuvering thrusters were not responding.

Kempo quietly cursed between clenched teeth. "Where did procurement pick up this piece of Corellian crud anyway? I've seen better hulks from Socorro!"

"Can you land?"

Kempo looked directly at Tigereye. "You want an honest opinion?" Brixie could tell that, this time, Kempo was no longer joking. Systems were failing all over the vessel. Beside her, she overheard Cutter whimpering. Some mercenary he made.

Tigereye unsnapped his own seat belts. "All hands to the lifepod now! This is no drill!"

The others spilled out of their chairs, rapidly grabbing equipment and supplies in emergency order and tossing them into the lifepod.

For only a moment during the chaos, Brixie found herself watching Lex Kempo almost curiously. The Corellian pathfinder was still standing before the controls of the battered, falling freighter, gesturing with his hands locked together in an odd sort of way. Perhaps it was a ritual known only to spacers and their ships, she thought. The last thing she saw before the interior lights failed was him grinning at her as he usually did. Their fates and the ship's were about to part ways in a most violent fashion.

"Hope you signed up for the duration, Lady Brix. From now on, it gets nothing but interesting!"

\* \* \*

Ten thousand meters later. Straight down.

"You know," said Hugo Cutter. "If you were Han Solo or Wedge Antilles or any one of a hundred other pilots I know, we wouldn't be here right now."

"Shut up," Lex Kempo snapped back. "I didn't see you help land the pod." Of course, it was difficult for the pathfinder to make an argument considering that the Red Moon assault team was dangling inside an escape pod caught in the thick canopy of Gabredor's jungle.

"Would it help if I did this?" Brixie's voice called from deeper inside the pod. A secondary hatch blew off, slicing vines and branches. Without means of further support, the pod fell the remaining 40 meters until it landed in the thick bough of an ancient swamp tree. Tigereye scratched his bruised head as he and the others spilled out of the pod and hit the dirt.

"No."

Kempo was the first to pick himself up off the jungle floor. He quickly checked the small arsenal of weapons he carried. Content, he turned and mock-saluted Sully Tigereye. "The Red Moons have landed."

"Thanks for the update. Brixie?"

"Yes?" The rookie pulled herself over. She had joined the Red Moons only two months ago, training at a distant base with other recruits who were either disgruntled or disappointed with the New Republic's efforts to liberate the remainder of the galaxy. Her parents, both dedicated to the medical sciences and the saving of lives, had been conscripted into military service with an Imperial faction which called itself the Pentastar Alignment. Brixie had signed on with the Red Moons as a medical technician, hoping to somehow put an end to her parents' servitude. She was still struggling with the ill-fitting armored hat that had been issued to her earlier by the Red Moons' procurement detail.

"Did you pull that hatch lever?"

She bit her lower lip. There were worse things one could do than to get a Trunsk angry. Uncomfortable, she resigned herself to her fate. "Yes sir, I did."

"And what did I tell you before?"

She rolled her eyes a bit. "Don't do *anything* unless you tell me to do it."

"Exactly." Figuring that he really shouldn't be angry with her, he snatched the helmet off her head and made several adjustments to the inner web straps. After a moment, the helmet fit her perfectly. "Now pay attention and stay close."

"Yes, sir!"

"And can that *sir* nonsense."

"Yes..." Catching herself, she shrunk back to help collect equipment from the lifepod.

"Excuse me," Kempo stretched his aching frame. "You know how I hate to interrupt your instruction of the troops but..."

At long last, Tigereye was finally irritated with Kempo's unamusing tirade.

"What is it, Kempo?"

"Can you please direct me to the bad guys so we can fry them and find a way off this lovely vacation spot?"

"Wrong attitude. This is not some search and destroy job like the last one you botched on Dantooine. This is a search and rescue. Here are the particulars that need rescuing."

He handed Kempo a datapad. Images of two young faces appeared in full portrait and side view modes. A distinct frown formed on the pathfinder's face as Brixie also looked at the datapad screen over his shoulder.

"Kiddies. We bailed out on to this mudball just to save a couple of pups?" Kempo tossed the datapad back at Tigereye. "The colonel must have gone nuts."

"Hey!" Cutter spoke up. "Colonel Stormcaller is the last sane person left in the galaxy. I can personally vouch for that."

"All bow. The Pirate King of Corellia has spoken," Kempo spat sarcastically as he affixed a grenade launcher underneath the muzzle of the "procured" stormtrooper blaster rifle he carried. "So the four of us are going up against a slaver camp to yank two kids out with no ship. I'd say we're off to a famous running Red Moon start, Tigereye."

"Who are they? Why are they so important?" Brixie started to say "sir," but managed to clip it off in time.

"Don't bother," Kempo answered as he spun a DL-18 blaster pistol around on his index finger. "Our job is not to question why. That's what diplomats and tax collectors are for. We're soldiers. We get paid to solve the problems their kind create. And I want you to know, Trunsk, that I intend to get paid very well for this little field trip."

Tigereye eyed him coldly as he handed the datapad to Brixie. "Study their faces and descriptions carefully. We need them alive. And intact."

"But we don't have a ship. Shouldn't we wait for a rescue pickup?" Brixie started to say.

"You're the team medtech," Tigereye's gaze hardened to dynaglass. "Is anyone here injured?"

She glanced at Kempo and the expressionless Hugo Cutter. So this was the life of the mercenary, she thought sullenly. Blindly taking orders. Crawling around on an unforgiving world, enemies all around them. No relief forces. No help. No remorse. She shook her head slowly.

The shriek of a snubfighter engine high over the tree canopy suddenly broke the silence. After a tense moment, it finally passed. Creatures and other tree-dwellers began to slowly hoot and call again through the dense foliage. Kempo's expression turned grim. "They found the crash. We better start moving."

Tigereye immediately agreed. "I can re-triangulate the coordinates of the slaver camp from our position here. I'll take the point. Kempo, you take the rear. Make sure you have your survival kits and critter repellents. The slavers chose this moss rock for a reason, and that's probably because these jungle worlds can be downright hostile. All right. Move out!"

\* \* \*

The slave master Greezim Trentacal relaxed in his chair aboard the transport freighter *Atron's Mistress*, fanning his face with the elaborately decorated hide of a lexiaus beast. His darkened quarters aboard the large freighter were filled with decorations and trinkets from a hundred different worlds. Trentacal sighed, letting his jowled complexion rest on his palm as he propped his head up with an elbow. A lithe, sparsely dressed human girl moved around him, her gestures as light as the spice-laced air. She offered him a cup of wine. Annoyed, he brushed her offering away as he looked to the shadow hiding there in the darkness.

"Just how long is this going to take, Vex? You know how I hate sitting here in this humid jungle."

In reply, a voice slithered back. "We await another shipment of slaves from the last expedition near the Rim. By dawn tomorrow, the ship should be completely filled."

"Good," Trentacal yawned. Details. Minor little details. The slaves down in the cargo holds of his ship were just tiny portions of merchandise compared to the credits he could be making. It was one of the problems of doing business with the Pentastar Alignment.

To suggest that the Pentastar Alignment was just another Imperial warlord faction, just another pale pretender to the mighty former Empire, was a foolish assumption. The Alignment perceived itself as the Empire reborn. Led by a Grand Moff named Arduus Kaine, the Alignment had ignored Grand Admiral Thrawn's attempt to consolidate Imperial forces, carefully waiting until it could mount its own campaign against the New Republic.

Unlike other warlords, the Alignment was extremely organized and well-equipped thanks to the corporates, powerful companies formerly allied with the Empire. Now that one of these corporates, specifically the PowerOn Conglomerate from Cantras Gola, was secretly threatening to bolt and join the New Republic, the Pentastar Alignment was doing everything it could to prevent it. So the Alignment had turned to the Karazak Slavers Guild to solve its New Republic problem.

How completely ironic, Trentacal mused, that the children of the Cantras Gola ambassador had been kidnapped by his slavers. The note left in their place made the ambassador's situation quite clear. As long the ambassador held off any further talks with the New Republic, the children would remain alive. The delay would be long enough for agents from the Alignment to completely sever the ties between Cantras Gola and the New Republic. In the end, Cantras Gola would remain loyal to the Pentastar Alignment and, in turn, the Karazak Slavers Guild would continue to conduct its operations on Gabredor III unhindered.

There were some benefits to this type of business arrangement -- Trentacal had decided to keep the children as payment for his work. The Alignment had no opinion on the matter; the ambassador himself would be experiencing a most unfortunate accident and be quietly replaced... with a more reliable Alignment official.

The slave master glanced sideways at the ambassador's children chained to the cabin's far wall and admitted that they would make fine additions to his household. Still, everything had its price. What, he wondered, would be the price for keeping these two?

Trentacal motioned to the slave girl at his side and took the cup of wine from her delicate hands. His thick palms caressed her expressionless cheek. The girl had been mute since a child. She had been among the first of the slaves he had kept for his own. He cupped his fingers under her chin and turned her head so that she could see the frightened children.

"Soon you will have others to instruct in the fine art of caring for me." The shadow stepped forward, barely discernible in the darkness of Trentacal's private cabin. Trentacal watched his bodyguard and confidant, a Defel, as he stood before the stateroom's viewports. Vex's thick body was completely covered in layers of rippling black fur that absorbed all surrounding light. In his right hand he held a comlink close to an attentive ear, his head bobbing slightly as he listened to what sounded like little more than static. Outside the viewports lurked the tangled jungle growth of Gabredor III and the surrounding clearing that comprised the staging camp. Lookout towers armed with heavy repeating blasters rose from the jungle floor. On either side of the bulbous freighter, slaves were being led into the ship under the scrutiny of Karazak thugs. It was a fabulously efficient operation, Trentacal assured himself. After all, it was his.

"What is it, Vex?" The Defel was responsible for not only for his master's security, but for the entire slaver operation on Gabredor. When summoned to the defense of his master, very few survived to tell about his rage. Trentacal did not mind the fear surrounding his kind's fearsome reputation either.

Vex thumbed the comlink off and turned slightly, not liking to stare too long at the pool of light that bathed his master. "One of the Z-95 patrols has spotted the wreckage of a light freighter some distance from here. The ship had come in low and fast, using some type of counter-measures to elude long range sensors and our patrols. Whoever they were, it appears they did not want any attention."

"Was it a ship from the New Republic?" Trentacal asked cautiously, suddenly alert.

The wraith's eye slits narrowed as he explained. "I do not think so. They would not risk coming so deep into Alignment territory. Doing so could mean an all-out war between them. That is something the New Republic is not willing to risk. The only way to know is to interrogate the survivors. But the main lifepod from the ship was not found in the wreckage. My trackers are still searching for it."

Trentacal slammed a meaty fist down on the armrest of his sumptuous chair. The serving girl sprang back in terror.

"Then it must be the Alignment. They've crossed us!"

The black head shook slowly. "I do not think it is the Pentastar Alignment either, Master Trentacal. Their resources are vast. They have no need for small strike teams. If they wanted to, they could attack with an *Enforcer*-class picket cruiser or something similar."

"Then who?"

Vex's eyes slid toward the far wall and the two figures chained silently there. The slovenly slave master sharply inhaled, understanding immediately. Whoever these intruders were, they were coming for *them*.

"Vex, I think you should activate the security perimeter."

"It has already been done, master."

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"Ged it ob of me!" Lex Kempo, the mercenary's mercenary, whined like a bantha calf as he pulled at the slimy, multi-folded creature that had fallen on his head. Brixie was trying her best to pry it off with her vibroknife. Sully Tigereye just watched them. If the situation had been different, he might have been amused.

"Get it off of him, Brixie," the Trunsk unsheathed a combat vibro-ax from his weapons harness.

"I'm trying!"

"Can we go home now?" Hugo muttered as he sat on a dead log, tired and agitated.

"I'm sorry we're boring you!" Kempo snapped. He had the creature by both hands and was forcibly pulling it off when the little beast whipped out a tail appendage and squirted a powdery jet in his face. Coughing and sneezing uncontrollably, Kempo knocked Brixie into the brush. Cutter laughed.

Tigereye swore, his patience exhausted. "That does it. Exobiology class is now over!"

Tigereye grabbed the thing by its now-extended tail and swung. The vibro-ax removed the flailing appendage. A greenish fluid squirted over everyone. The creature flopped off Kempo's head and expired at their feet.

Humiliation forgotten, Brixie immediately snapped open her medkit and examined the grumbling pathfinder's head for puncture marks or other lacerations that would indicate a bite. She used a water jet to clear off his face. A quick spot test of the creature's blood revealed that it was not inherently dangerous. Unfortunately, there was little she could do for their wallowing morale. They had been trudging through the jungle for almost a day now. Tempers were as short as grenade timers.

"I feel like a droid with a bunch of haywire receptors and a bad servo creak. Thanks kid," Kempo wiped at his face with the moisture cloth Brixie had given him. "What was that thing?"

Tigereye considered for a moment. "I don't know, but you're lucky it wasn't poisonous. I suggest the next time you hear a noise, you might want to look up as well as around." Kempo fell quiet as he poked sympathetically at the growing welt on his forehead. Cutter continued to chuckle.

Tigereye turned his ire on the squatting demolitions expert. "I don't recall giving any order for a rest break, Hugo."

"Well, you guys looked so busy fooling around with that thing that I didn't want to disturb you."

"Time's short. You're on point. I want you to scout ahead and make sure there aren't any more surprises waiting for us."

The frazzled-haired engineer pointed at his own chest, startled. "You want me to... scout? Sully, you know I don't scout. I blow things up into itty-bitty pieces. Everyone in the unit says I make a poor scout."

"Consider it a valuable life lesson. Brixie's gotta finish checking out Kempo, and someone has to watch over her."

Hugo rose angrily to his feet, the charges still rattling around in his camo bag. He drew a blaster pistol from a holster.

"Fine, but who's going to watch over me?"

"Enough complaining. Scoot!"

Hugo vanished over the dead log he had been sitting on, still complaining loudly as he walked off. Tigereye shook his tired, grizzled head. Removing the map pad, he checked their current coordinates with the expected slaver encampment. They should be reaching their security perimeter soon. He looked up momentarily to watch Brixie dab a medicated ointment on Kempo's head. She was also looking at him.

"Problem?"

"No. I was just wondering," she stumbled over her words. "I mean, everyone spends so much time arguing and insulting. You don't act exactly like what I've seen. You know... like professionals."

She stopped, believing she had somehow completely insulted them. Now it was Kempo's turn to laugh. Even Tigereye, surprisingly, was not offended. "You've been watching too many entertainment holos, Brixie. Not all of us pretend to be the master merc like Kempo."

"Who's pretending?" Kempo interrupted, still rinsing his eyes. "Don't let our sparring fool you any, kid. We go back a long way. Far enough back to hate each other's guts and still be the best of chums."

"Hugo's your best friend?" Brixie looked confused. "But you don't act like best friends."

Tigereye pursed his lips. "Everyone in this company, everyone in the Red Moons that is, comes with a story. Your parents for instance. You don't like the way the Alignment is treating them, do you?"

"My parents were both taken from their clinic and forced to work for the Alignment military as combat surgeons. It's almost as if they've been locked up. I just want them back."

"Hugo's parents were Imperial nobility. He lived on a corporate world during the reign of the Emperor. His parents tried everything to keep him under control, including locking him up. I was treated like an animal once. I know what it's like to be caged. When you go through life like that, sometimes you need someone to keep you in check. Hugo minds over me like I mind him."

Kempo pulled himself to his feet and handed the salve back to her. "Remember kid, the first rule of soldiering is to not let appearances fool you. Tigereye didn't choose us for this team just because of our singing voices. Tigereye's got more combat experience in his little right toe claw than most Imperial generals. Hugo can make an AT-ST dance a jig and explode with just a spanner and a thermal detonator. My job is to make sure we survive to brag about this little tale. And in case we do fall apart, Lady Brix, your job is to put the little pieces back together so I can collect my finish fee."

Brixie felt completely embarrassed. What she had mistaken for open hostility among the three veterans was actually their way of dealing with yet another impossible situation.

Hugo Cutter's head suddenly appeared over the log.

"Excuse me. I don't want to interrupt your talking about me, but I think I found something."

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From a distance, the sensor mast appeared like a metal chrome ball mounted on a pole slightly taller than the surrounding vegetation. Others just like it rose approximately 20 meters to either side. They positioned themselves almost 30 meters away from the distinct-looking sensor fence.

"Looks like we found their perimeter," Kempo muttered quietly to Tigereye, not anxious to trip any possible acoustical pickups. Behind them, Cutter and Brixie waited anxiously.

"Or we tripped over a buried outer perimeter line already." Tigereye checked his own detection instruments. Despite his concern, the possibility of an outer barrier was unlikely here. The ever-present moisture and local lifeforms would make short work of almost anything made of metal or complex circuitry buried in the humus. He glanced back. "All right Hugo, you're on."

Cutter took off his service jacket and dumped the contents of his bag of tricks on to it. Shaped charges, broken datapads, anti-vehicle grenades, droid parts and bits of c-board and chips spilled everywhere. Kempo eyed the strange assortment with some disdain.

"You're carrying enough junk to supply Industrial Automaton."

"Spare me," Cutter snapped back as he set to work. Brixie watched the entire process with interest as Kempo and Tigereye took up sentry positions close by. Not even realizing she had been recruited to assist him, Cutter was asking her for tools from the tech kit and bits from the scrap pile. In minutes, a truly strange conglomeration of sensor boards, probe droid chips, scanners and communication jammers was taking shape.

"Is this going to work?" she asked.

Cutter took a moment to sit back and admire his creation with a small sense of satisfaction. "They banned me from the Imperial Engineering Academy. They laughed at me. Well, does this look like the work of a madman to you?"

Brixie stared hard at the device. Cutter looked up at her, perhaps sensing the thoughts crossing her mind. A crooked little smile formed across his lips. "Don't bother answering that."

A crashing sound from the nearby bushes startled all of them into silence. Kempo growled over to them, "Keep down. Someone just set off one of my door bells."

Tigereye pulled out a set of macrobinoculars. Keeping his view on the trail they had just come from, he waited for several long moments. He saw a brief movement and focused. Through the viewfinder, he saw a scaly head sniffing the ground. Moving the binocs slowly, he finally caught the rider wearing a camosuit to blend against the jungle backdrop. The rider was clenching a long force pike in his free hand as he examined Kempo's "door bell," a tree limb tied across the trail with thin cord.

"What is it?" Kempo whispered.

"Looks like a tracker. Riding some kind of two-legged reptoid."

Kempo used the targeting sight on his stormtrooper rifle to watch the newcomer. "I see him now. Another might be close by," he whispered.

"Another won't make any difference. All it takes is one report to bring the whole slaver camp down on our heads."

"Those odds are good enough for me." Kempo unsnapped the scabbard on his back and handed Brixie a very sharp vibrocutlass, its blade and edges blackened for military duty. She dubiously took the weapon in her hands.

"What's this for?"

"You get to watch my back for a change. I've had enough of this mud crawl." Kempo started running toward the trees. "The rest of you take down the fence. I'll handle the bad guys!"

"Kempo! I didn't..." Tigereye snarled at him just as the pathfinder took off. Brixie and Cutter looked to him for guidance. "Don't just sit there! Hugo, disarm the fence. Brixie, you cover him!" No sooner had he said that when he too had disappeared through the thick growth.

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Kempo dropped to one knee as he sprang through the trees, startling the tracker and his mount. He fired the blaster rifle at short range, but missed the rider.

The rider spurred the trained reptoid and charged. The creature snapped at the open air just by his head, then tried to cleave him open with serrated feet claws. Kempo fired back, his stolen set of Imperial scout armor taking the brunt of the beast's charge as it sent him sprawling. The impact knocked the blaster rifle out of his hands.

Poised above him, the tracker raised his force pike to strike. A howling, fur-covered missile burst from the trees, turning the tracker's attention away. Sully Tigereye crashed against both tracker and beast, his vibro-ax swinging and connecting against the creature's thick hide. The reptoid screamed from the terrible injury and bolted away, carrying its rider reluctantly along with it. With the tracker's back turned to them now, Kempo picked up his fallen weapon and fired. A screaming burst of energy struck the tracker square in the back, killing him before he struck the ground. The injured reptoid, now riderless, kept on crashing loudly away through the foliage. Tigereye brandished his vibro-ax at Kempo.

"I should have let that thing take a bite out of you, if only to teach you a lesson."

"I was doing just fine before you showed up."

"Let me guess -- you had him exactly where you wanted him," the Trunsk snorted as he caught his breath. "Check the body. If we're lucky, he didn't have a chance to report in."

"We're never that lucky," Kempo retorted as he headed over to the body of the dead tracker.

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Hugo got to his feet, holding up the contraption. Brixie looked on, eyeing him and his spontaneous invention dubiously. He began to move slowly toward the sensor mast, fumbling for the power switches that would activate the united parts. He suddenly stopped in his tracks.

"What's wrong?" Brixie half-whispered to him, trying to watch him and their surroundings at the same time.

"Something about this type of sensor mast."



He took another step. A whine came from the datapad's power coupling. The device was not used to handling the power requirements of the other components. The two and a half meter tall mast loomed over his head as he slowly approached. An expression of recognition came over Cutter. He stopped in his tracks, making quick adjustments to the components in his hands.

"Now I remember!"

"Remember what?" Brixie sputtered.

An intense beeping came from Hugo's contraption. Before Brixie's eyes, an alternating pattern of light began to phase from the sensor mast. She gasped as the solid-looking ground before their feet suddenly evaporated, exposing a cargo speeder-sized ditch trap. Explosives and mines lay at the bottom of the excavated pit. Hugo smirked.

"A holographic trap. Very sneaky. Very expensive. These slavers have better security than I thought. Did you see how I set the multiphase emitter to turn off the hologram?"

Brixie had been watching Hugo so intently that she almost did not hear the sound of dead leaves and underbrush being crushed behind her. She spun around, Kempo's vibrocutlass in her hands. A second tracker and his reptoid leered at her like predators about to pounce. A threatening rumble echoed in the sharp-toothed beast's throat as the tracker leveled the point of his force pike at Brixie's throat.

"Ah, Hugo?" she gulped.

\* \* \*

The sound of a female scream cut through the jungle air like the edge of Sully Tigereye's polished vibro-ax. The Trunk plunged through the jungle, back toward the sensor perimeter.

Tigereye stumbled into a clearing in time to see Lex Kempo drop from the trees and fall on the tracker. The reptoid bucked underneath them as the pathfinder slapped a now familiar-looking organism on the tracker's head. The tracker, his eyes completely covered by the filmy creature, knocked Kempo off as he swung the force pike wildly.

The whole scene looked completely ridiculous until the blinded tracker spurred the reptoid forward. A shot from Tigereye's own heavy blaster brought the tracker down, but the creature still charged into and over a shrieking Brixie.

"Brixie!" Tigereye bellowed, leaping forward.

The beast suddenly became quiet and rolled away from the startled girl in a heap -- Kempo's vibrocutlass buried up to its hilt in its scaly chest. She looked more terrified than hurt as Tigereye ran up to her.

"Are you okay?"

She gulped once and fought to bring her fear under control. "Yes ... yes I'm fine." Even Cutter was stunned as he looked up at the tree branch where Kempo had jumped from.

"And I thought I was crazy," he muttered.

Kempo had gotten to his feet. Brixie watched him for some time, trying to think of some way to thank him without sounding petty. Shrugging the incident away, the pathfinder turned his back to her and retrieved his vibrocutlass. He then moved to the body of the fallen tracker, switching off his comlink. Exhaling hard, Brixie collected her medkit and gear, not desiring to look on the scene anymore.

In the meantime, Cutter and Tigereye had turned their attention to the disarmed sensor mast and the exposed pit trap.

"Can we go around it?" Tigereye had exchanged his vibro-ax for the map locator. Cutter triumphantly held up his device.

"No problem. Those slavers are probably scratching their heads, wondering how we did it."

"If the slavers stick around long enough to wonder." Tigereye interjected. "We have only one shot at this. Karazak slavers aren't stupid. Once they figure out we bypassed their perimeter, they will probably leave their paid guns behind to pick us off while they jump planet with their valuables -- including the children."

"Sully," Brixie slung a medical pack over her shoulder. "Before we go any further with this, I have to know who these children are. The least you can do is tell us why their lives are more important than ours."

"The kid's right," Kempo added as he sheathed the vibrocutlass in its carrier. "I'm deliberately jumping out of perfectly good trees for these pups. You owe us that much."

Tigereye sighed. "They're the children of the ambassador to Cantras Gola."

"Cantras Gola is a corporate world." Brixie found herself getting angry. "An Alignment world. What's so important about that?"

"Everything," Tigereye silenced her. "Kempo is right, Brixie. We're soldiers. We don't ask questions. We supply answers. With an entire corporate world about to sway over to the New Republic, and the New Republic unable to openly confront the Pentastar Alignment, you need someone else to fight the battle. We are that someone else."

"But I thought the reason why the Red Moons broke away from the New Republic was because the New Republic wasn't doing enough. Now we're fighting their battles for them!"

"Helping the New Republic win Cantras Gola helps everyone. Like it or not, returning these kids alive to the Cantras Gola ambassador is crucial. We need to take that slaver ship before it gets away. It's the only way to save those kids and for us to get off this planet. Now are there more questions from the ranks?"

The four of them looked at each other, the faint odor of ozone from blaster fire still in the air around them.

"I suppose it's too late to request a transfer?" Kempo remarked.

\* \* \*

The longer he waited, the more Greezim Trentacal nervously paced about the deluxe stateroom aboard *Atron's Mistress*. The trackers sent out to investigate the crashed freighter's missing escape pod had not reported in for several hours. There was more to the mysterious, downed vessel than even Vex had anticipated.

"They must be soldiers. Or worse. Mercenaries." He shuddered at the thought. The incentive of credits and personal fortune that drove beings to enslave other beings also drove them to fight for foolish causes.

"Well?" He looked to Vex, still poised like a dark statue beside the stateroom's viewports. He dropped the comlink from his ear.

"The tracker team is still not responding. In addition, one of the perimeter sensors seems to have malfunctioned, although I do not know why yet."

"They're here!" Trentacal put a hand over his mouth, completely alarmed now. "Lords of Atron! They're here already! Give the order to debark. Immediately!"

"As I pointed out earlier," the Defel spoke quietly but firmly, "We have not loaded the latest shipment of slaves." He gestured at the large prefabricated building that served as a temporary clearinghouse for the newest arrivals. "They have to be tagged and medically scanned. Many slaves from this shipment are to be sold to the Hutts. You know how displeased the Hutts become when they are sent inferior wares."

"You can medically scan them after they have been loaded. Do as I command!"

Vex's expression did not change. He bowed slightly.

"I will give the order personally, master. We shall depart immediately."

Trentacal rushed out of the stateroom to his own sleeping quarters. The Defel wraith looked upon the ambassador's children, still chained to the cabin wall. Expressions laden with fear and loathing gazed back up at him. The girl, several years older than her brother, tried to protectively shield him from Vex's penetrating, awful stare.

Suddenly, the wraith was gone. The girl blinked, uncertain whether or not to believe her eyes. She had not imagined the disappearance. Abruptly, the cabin door bolts clanged solidly shut, locking them in darkness again. Her brother whimpered. She held him a little tighter, silently wondering what would become of them.

Something touched her shoulder. The girl gasped loudly, if only long enough for a hand to clamp down over her mouth. She recognized the pained expression of Trentacal's favorite slave girl. How long had she been hiding here, waiting for Vex to leave? The slave pressed a key into her hand and made a gesture with her finger to her lips.

Before she could say a word of thanks, the door to Trentacal's private chamber was suddenly shoved aside, the slave master's bulky outline filling the doorway. His face was masked in shadow. "What's going on in here?"

\* \* \*

Lying prone in the foliage ahead of the assault team, Lex Kempo aimed the macrobinoculars at the clearing in the jungle growth before him.

"What do you see?" Brixie whispered beside him.

The slaver camp consisted of several watchtowers, a few prefabricated buildings and a currently-vacant landing pad for a snubfighter-sized craft. In the middle of the camp, the jungle's heavy humus had been pressure-formed flat to provide room for the large cargo transport situated there. Beings of all origins were being rushed into the ship, which was not a good sign.

Kempo chewed slowly on a bit of protein survival wafer as he continued to sight the camp through the binocs. "Looks like we're outgunned maybe seven to one. There are four watchtowers armed with blaster cannons: two close to us, two past the freighter. The camp is crawling with thugs. See that bunker right beside the ship? Looks like their command center. All sensors, communications and defensive controls are probably housed in there."

"Are those hatches on the side?"

Kempo frowned as he zoomed the binoculars. "You've got laser eyes, kid. Those are definitely gun ports. It doesn't matter, that bunker might as well be half a light year away. We'll get cut down before we even reach the freighter."

"Not if I can keep them occupied," Cutter's voice murmured behind them.

Kempo and Brixie looked around in unison at Cutter and his bag of magic tricks. In his hands he had one of the oddly concave Mesonics focalized explosives, the kind used to demolish structures. Squatting beside Hugo, Sully Tigereye made a hand gesture, fingers spread open wide which he turned into a fist. Kempo snorted derisively, but still nodded in agreement. Confused, Brixie poked at Kempo.

"I'm not familiar with that hand signal," she whispered to him. "What does it mean?"

The pathfinder smiled grimly as he switched the safety off on the grenade launcher mounted to his stormtrooper blaster rifle.

"It means hang on to your pretty head. We're about to make some noise."

\* \* \*

The slave girl lunged at Trentacal, a slender metal object in her hands. Despite his size, the slave master could move quickly if he wanted to. In seconds, he had the girl's arms pinned. She strained silently against his grip, trying to bite his hands. Trentacal held her long enough for him to press the emergency call. The wraith and several armed guards appeared in moments, just as Trentacal pushed the slave girl roughly to the cabin floor.

"Fools! All of you! You're supposed to protect me!" He held up the knife he had taken and pointed it at the slave girl. "I want you to vaporize this insolent thing and get us out of here! And pray that my next wish is not all of your heads on a serving platter!" The guards drew their energy weapons, aiming them at the slave. The ambassador's daughter cried aloud, trying to shield her brother from the cruel scene.

A muffled explosion rattled the huge transport. Trentacal's eyes bulged in mute surprise as he watched two of the guard towers tip over and collapse in perfect unison.

\* \* \*

Kempo and Brixie had made it only as far as the makeshift landing pad for the camp's snubfighter when the snouts of several huge blaster cannons appeared from slits in the command bunker. The heavy weapons were laying down a withering curtain of fire, pinning them there.

"Hold still!" Brixie was still trying to apply a medical wrap to Kempo's singed right leg. The pathfinder had unexpectedly been the first target of the heavy blaster attack.

"Look at the size of those guns!" Kempo clucked his tongue in a tisking manner. "They probably ripped them out from some capital ship."

"Who cares! Can you see Hugo and Sully?"

Kempo poked his head slightly around the corner and shot a slaver guard in the torso, dropping him instantly. He spotted Cutter's familiar tousled mane of hair as he hid from the energy fire coming from the command bunker. The prefabricated structures he hid behind would not last for long.

"Hugo's trapped over by those buildings." He tapped his comlink switch twice, but there was no reply. He shook his head. "I can't raise Sully, but I think he made it to the freighter."

When Kempo looked around the corner again, the bunker's weapons were aiming once again for Cutter. Energy beams rained down all over the demolitions expert, burning away huge chunks of the prefabricated structures. Kempo shouted over the din back to Brixie.

"Hugo's gonna be a little smoking pile of nothing unless we do something to shut those guns up!"

Surprised by his words, she looked over at the impregnable command bunker. "But shouldn't we be going for the freighter? That's our way out of here!"

"Leaving teammates behind is not in my employment description." Kempo took a step back and jostled something. The niche where they were hiding served as a storage shed for the landing pad. He disappeared for a moment inside and returned with a grav-cart and a half dozen large cylinders with prominent warning labels plastered over them.

"I think it's time we extended a warm Red Moon greeting to our slaver friends."

\* \* \*

Two guards armed with stun prods stood by a secondary boarding ramp of the cargo transport, shoving as many of the enslaved beings as they could into the ship. Many of the slaves, panicked by the explosions and screaming beams of energy fire, had taken this opportunity to run. The guards were in no place to argue. One by one, the other loading ramps were closing as the ship began its final preparations for takeoff. A message crackled over the guards' secure comlinks. Relieved to be as far away from the shooting as possible, they began to climb the ramp. As one of the guards turned to follow the slaves in, he noticed a slave without a restraint collar. He growled to his partner as he seized the Trunsk by the arm.

"Hey! They forgot to put a pain collar on this one."

Sully Tigereye turned around. Sharpened fighting claws seized the startled guard by his chin. In his other hand, he aimed a heavy blaster pistol at the second guard and shot the stun prod right out of his hands. The guard spun and ran.

"There will be no more pain collars. Not as long as I live." He clenched the first guard by the jowls of his neck and swung his face close. "Now that I have your undivided attention -- where's your boss?"

\* \* \*

Working quickly, Kempo and Brixie stacked the cart with the fuel cylinders they had found as well as the explosives and grenades they were carrying. The cannon fire around them was getting closer and closer.

"Come to think of it, there's one small problem with this plan," Kempo muttered half-aloud.

"We don't have time for problems!" Brixie replied, wincing slightly as a piece of the nearby landing pad was blasted apart by a bunker weapon.

"One of us is going to have to pilot this thing up to their doorstep." They both looked at each other, eyes frozen. A tight little grin began to form across Kempo's face. He took Brixie's hand and kissed the back of it.

"Don't worry kid, I just volunteered." The pathfinder climbed aboard and took up a position by the cart's steering controls, trying to hunker down low. He handed her the stormtrooper rifle.

"Keep them occupied long enough for me to get up close." He activated the cart's repulsorlift controls. The cart surged slowly forward as he smirked back at her.

"Just don't let people forget about me, right?"

She shook her head. There was something about his expression that she had never seen before. There was so much she wanted to learn about him and no time left.

As the grav-cart emerged, Brixie took up a position to the side of the landing pad. She fired the rifle's grenade launcher, spitting concussion explosives at the hardened outer shell of the command bunker -- for what little good it would do.

The grav-cart zigzagged across the clearing. For what felt like an eternity, the bunker's blaster weapons clumsily tried to follow him, just barely missing. Just as the grav-cart reached the bunker, Brixie could see the pathfinder time his leap -- only to stumble on the cart's side railing. His foot caught, he was dragged relentlessly along until ...

The next second, she was looking up at the failing light of the evening sky. The shock wave had knocked Brixie flat on her back. She staggered to her feet. Where there had been a command bunker, there was now only the jagged remains of a permacrete foundation. Even the sides of the cargo transport had been scorched by the blast. Slavers were running wildly in all directions. She moved to the edge of the heart of the fire, shielding her face as she looked for a familiar form to stagger out.

Kempo had to come out. That's the way the holos always ended. The hero always walked out.

Nobody did.

Hugo grabbed her by the arm and began pulling her over to the ship.

"No!" she screamed at him. "We won't leave a teammate behind! We can't!"

He had to drag her away from the inferno.

\* \* \*

The explosion was so huge it shook the cargo transport violently on its landing legs.

The transport bridge's accessway popped open. Tigereye shoved the guard into a few of the crewers standing there. Several reached for weapons, but they were not fast enough. Energy beams ricocheted across the bridge. When it was over, Tigereye waved the blaster pistol at the survivors.

"Everybody in the escape pod! Now!"

They filed into the bridge's lifeboat pod. Tigereye sealed the hatchway behind them, locking them inside. After securing the bridge, he then tapped his comlink.

There was no need. Brixie and Hugo Cutter appeared at the bridge's accessway. The demolitions expert's shoulders were sagging. Brixie was crestfallen, tears streaming down her cheeks. Tigereye understood immediately. Kempo. The explosion.

His hands balled into fists, Tigereye wanted to scream. He wanted to tear the bridge apart. He grabbed the guard he had taken prisoner and slammed him against one of the control consoles so hard the impact dented the panels. He shoved the datapad before the guard's eyes, pictures of the ambassador's children flashing on the tiny screen.

"They're not among the slaves held down below. So *where* are they?"

The guard gestured at another doorway on the bridge. "They're in the master's quarters! In there!"

Tigereye tossed the heavy blaster pistol to Cutter as he unsheathed his vibro-ax.

"Set weapons to stun. We need those children alive."

"I'm coming too," Brixie stepped forward, shaking, still clenching Lex Kempo's stormtrooper rifle with whitened knuckles. Tigereye gestured at the guard.

"No. You have to watch him."

Brixie pivoted and shot the guard using the blaster rifle's stun setting at point-blank range. The guard slumped over into unconsciousness.

"He's going nowhere," she replied tersely as she inserted two stun grenades into the rifle launcher.

Tigereye and Cutter regarded each other, surprised.

Muffled blaster fire erupted from somewhere behind the door, followed by a painful scream. Tigereye gestured to Cutter at the door controls.

"Open it. Now!"

\* \* \*

The well-appointed domain of the slave master was almost completely dark. The slave master himself was dead, slumped over in his lounge. Brixie immediately took a step toward the young girl and her brother still chained to the wall, but Tigereye held her back. From the way they were cowering in silence, he could tell something was not right.

"Someone else is in here," Tigereye whispered.

"That is correct," a voice from the dark declared.

Crouching low, the mercenaries separated as they made their way into the cabin. As she moved past the lounge, Brixie's foot grazed something soft. She inhaled sharply as she saw the torn throat of a dead slave girl lying on the floor, a hold-out blaster still clutched in her tiny hands. The slave master's guards lay dead close by.

"She saw an opportunity to escape," the voice explained matter-of-factly. "I had to convince her otherwise. Take a good look, mercenaries. Your fate will be the same as hers."

A shape lunged at Cutter, sending him sprawling across the floor. In just moments, the shape appeared again, claws burying deeply inside Brixie's protective vest. The thing shoved her into the wall, knocking her senseless. The stormtrooper rifle clattered to the floor.

Holding her injured head and side, she heard more fighting. Trying to focus, she saw their attacker stand against the dim light of the cabin's viewports for only a moment. She immediately recognized the shaggy, black-furred creature from her medical training at the university. No wonder the lights were out!

"It's a Defel! A wraith!"

Tigereye found the cabin's lighting controls and flipped them to their maximum setting. Glowspheres filled the room with brightness. The terrifying creature screamed in agony, trying to shield its eyes from the powerful lights.

Surrounded and blinded, the Defel spun around wildly. Brixie had picked up the stormtrooper blaster rifle. Hugo Cutter was back up on his feet, blaster pistol in hand, his face badly bruised. Sully Tigereye's gaze narrowed to a chilled yellow as he took a step forward, vibro-ax in hand.

"The only fate you should be worrying about... is your own."

\* \* \*

The cargo ship, almost fully laden with freed slaves, climbed slowly into the sky above Gabredor III. Below on the night-eclipsed surface of the planet, the destroyed slaver camp burned with a vengeance. Tigereye had made it a point that they should leave plenty of Red Moon marks for all to find there. Knowing they had been targeted, the Karazak Slavers Guild would have to look long and hard for another place to conduct its business. And with the children of the Gola ambassador safely aboard the ship, the Pentastar Alignment had lost as well.

In Brixie's heart, it was a hollow victory. They had tried to search the wreckage of the command bunker, but the fire was simply too hot. She sat in a chair on the transport's bridge, keeping to herself as Tigereye and Cutter familiarized themselves with the ship's astrogation controls. She finally thought about taking the helmet off her head. With a tired sigh, she undid the straps and let the helmet fall to the deck beside her feet.

Tigereye looked over at the sound. During her training, it had been difficult for her to judge the Trusk -- to separate reputation from reality. The same clawed hands which had so eagerly torn the Defel to pieces were the same hands which gladly unlocked the pain collars of dozens of slaves.

She finally realized why he had chosen her for this mission. There were some things that cannot come with training or preparation, they must be experienced and felt. Brixie had experienced the camaraderie and the fear, seen the violence and death that was all part of the life of the blaster-for-hire. For a brief moment, Tigereye's expression softened. He and Hugo would mourn the loss of their lifetime friend in their own ways.

Her gaze fell upon the bridge's visual screens. Gabredor III was falling slowly away. She found herself wishing Lex was here, wondering what his reaction would have been to her realization. He probably would have just winked at her.

Then she saw the remains of the slaver camp on the screens. A chill ran down her spine -- there was something familiar about the shape of fires down there. Kempo's voice echoed in her mind. In his own words, the pathfinder had indeed gone out in a blaze of glory. From hundreds of kilometers above, the explosion that had flattened the command bunker appeared like a fiercely glowing crescent...

A red moon.